

Learner-Centered Listening Assessment

By Christine Coombe and Jon Kinney

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, we will briefly define what is meant by a learner-centered approach. Second, we will provide a rationale for infusing learner-centered techniques in a classroom assessment. Third, we will suggest a framework and specific activities for incorporating learner-centered classroom assessment techniques.

To date, the idea of learner-centered approaches to assessment, particularly in the area of listening comprehension, has not been fully explored. Although the notion of learner-centeredness has been applied successfully to teaching practice (Campbell and Kryszewska 1992; Deller 1989), methodology (Nunan 1988; Tudor 1997), curriculum development (Nunan 1988), and learner training (Wenden 1986; Wenden and Rubin 1987; Oxford 1990), little mention has been made of the possibility of applying learner-centered techniques in assessment. This is especially true in the area of listening assessment, where the testing process itself may not reflect learner needs (Rost 1990) but where assessment serves as a key source of motivation for many learners.

Learner Control vs. Quality Control

The lack of response from testing specialists with regard to applying learner-centered techniques to the assessment of language skills, like listening, is not surprising given the natural tension between learner control and quality control in language testing. While advocates of learner-centered approaches propose giving learners control over various aspects of language learning, testing specialists maintain that assessment practices should be guided by the cornerstones of good testing, that is, validity, reliability, practicality, and washback (Alderson, Clapham, and Wall 1996), and not by individual learners themselves.

ELT practitioners can accommodate both increased learner involvement in skill area testing and still maintain high testing standards. Classroom assessment offers an ideal environment for piloting and implementing learner-centered assessment techniques. Unlike national or standardized exam situations, in classroom testing situations teachers often have control over exam development and administration. The classroom assessment environment provides opportunities to hand over decision-making duties and creative tasks to learners.

A Learner-Centered Approach

A learner-centered approach in language instruction is founded on the concept that the learner is central in the learning process. Learners learn primarily because of what they bring to their classroom experience in terms of their perceived needs, motivations, past experiences, background knowledge, interests, and creative skills. Learners are active as opposed to passive recipients of knowledge. They may assume a decision-making role in the classroom, often deciding what is to be learned, through which activities, and at what pace. Learners can also produce materials and provide realia for the classroom. Teachers, on the other hand, are seen as facilitators, helpers, and resources (Campbell and Kryszewska 1992), with a decentralized role.

Rationale for Learner-Centered Assessment

Advocates of learner-centered teaching methodologies and curricula argue that involving learners enhances motivation, which in turn heightens achievement. Learner-centered approaches offer additional benefits for the classroom teacher including constant needs analysis, reduced prep time through the use of student-generated materials, peer-teaching and correcting, increased group solidarity, a decentralized teacher role, increased understanding of student concerns and problems, learner-training benefits, and finally, increased maturity and responsibility among students.

Classroom teachers can expect similar benefits from adopting assessment practices that utilize learner-centered techniques. Classroom teachers who involve their students in test development, administration, and marking may find their students becoming more motivated and responsible.

Learner involvement in classroom assessment can also raise both teacher and learner awareness of learning and test-taking strategies. Involvement will additionally help students to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. Finally, a learner-centered approach to assessment will promote student autonomy and independent learning skills.

Testing the Listening Skill

Listening has been frequently identified as a skill area that is often tested but rarely taught (Tauroza 1997). Even in nonassessment situations, most classroom listening activities center around some prelistening task followed by listening to a monologue or conversation and answering some form of comprehension questions that are then evaluated. Feedback consists of students comparing their answers with a "correct" answer.

Many proponents of communicative language teaching advise, however, that language teachers shift from an orientation of "we will teach only what we can test" to finding ways to evaluate those skills that are important for learners (Savignon 1985). A learner-centered approach to listening comprehension assessment would provide classroom teachers with an excellent opportunity to discover what learners value in listening.

Steps to Incorporate Learner-Centered Techniques in Listening Assessment

Incorporating a learner-centered approach to listening assessment entails three necessary steps. First, classroom teachers should evaluate the learner-centeredness of their present assessment practices. Second, teachers need to identify the areas in listening assessment (i.e., test development, administration, marking) in which learners can be actively involved without compromising standards or upsetting local educational practices. Finally, teachers need to develop, pilot, and include learner-centered listening assessment activities into normal classroom routine.

The checklist (see Figure 1 below) is a tool that teachers can use to evaluate the learner-centeredness of their current listening assessment practices. After teachers have evaluated the learner-centeredness of their current assessment practice, they need to identify specific areas in listening assessment in which their students could be actively involved.

The classroom assessment process is usually divided into three major phases: test content and development, administration, and marking. In the test content and development phase, teachers identify skill or sub-skill areas to be tested, choose topics or themes, and select and write test questions and instructions. In the test administration phase, teachers make decisions regarding when to give the test, how to arrange student seating, what equipment and media are needed (audiotape, videotape, live reader), and what interaction and extra materials are allowed. This is the phase in which all administrative testing policies and procedures are addressed.

Once tests have been administered, they need to be scored. Important areas such as developing marking criteria, deciding who marks the test, and checking and recording scores need to be considered.

Assessment activities

Although classroom teachers usually assume full responsibility for all aspects of the testing process, each phase in the assessment process offers valuable opportunities to involve learners. The teacher's role should be to decide which area(s) are appropriate for student involvement as well as to design and monitor activities in which students take responsibility for certain aspects of the listening assessment process.

The following sample activities involve students in deciding what is to be tested, selecting or producing appropriate materials, writing test questions, administering listening tests, and scoring such tests. All of these activities can be adapted for different skill areas in addition to listening.

Student-generated exams.

Students design and produce listening tests which they later administer and score. Typically, student-generated exams are produced in groups and given to other groups of students. Student-generated exams provide teachers with interesting insights into what information and skills students value.

Test committee activities.

Different groups of students are given different test-related responsibilities. Such responsibilities can be rotated over time, so all students have opportunities to be involved in various aspects of the test.

Legislative activities.

Students are given certain decision-making powers regarding their tests. Such powers might include agenda-setting, voting on various aspects of test content, administration, and marking.

Producing an answer key.

Students work in groups or as a class with a written transcript of the listening passage they heard in order to produce a key that will be used to mark their tests.

Peer-correction.

Students are responsible for accurately marking and scoring each other's tests.

Self-correction.

Students are responsible for accurately marking and scoring their own tests.

Important considerations

When identifying target phases in the assessment process and selecting and planning specific activities, teachers should consider several important issues:

Classroom context. How will class size, grouping (ESL/EFL), seating arrangement, and available equipment affect the expected outcome?

Student population. How will student-related factors such as age, maturity level, student conduct, proficiency level, range of abilities, or gender affect their ability to participate successfully in selected learner-centered activities?

Test weight. How important is the test?

Practicality.

How much or how little will the anticipated student involvement hinder or expedite the assessment process?

Conclusion

Although a good testing practice seems to be at odds with a learner-centered approach, we believe that not only is it possible to have aspects of learner-centeredness in the listening assessment process, but that classroom teachers should be actively pursuing this goal. Proponents of learner-centered approaches maintain that increased learner involvement in aspects of the learning experience is highly beneficial. We believe that the benefits of learner involvement should be further extended into classroom assessment practices. Involving learners in their own listening assessment would be motivating for students and would help teachers gain insights into what their students really value.

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Figure 1

How learner-centered is your classroom assessment?
<p><i>Directions:</i> Write a number from 1 to 5 in the boxes to indicate the extent of student involvement in your current assessment practices. Use the following scale:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. never my students2. sometimes my students3. 50/504. usually my students5. always my students
<p>Test context and Development</p> <p>___ Who chooses the topics or themes?</p> <p>___ Who selects the testing formats or tasks</p> <p>___ Who selects or writes the text?</p> <p>___ Who develops the test questions?</p> <p>___ Who writes the instructions?</p> <p>___ Who decides which language (L1/L2) the instructions or questions are written in?</p> <p>___ Who select the key vocabulary?</p>
<p>Test Administration</p> <p>___ Who selects the time and date of the exam?</p> <p>___ Who chooses the seating arrangements?</p> <p>___ Who operates the equipment or reads a script?</p>

- ___ Who decides when the test begins and ends?
- ___ Who decides how many times the text is read/played?
- ___ Who decides how much interaction is allowed during test administration?
- ___ Who decides whether and which extra materials (dictionaries, notes, texts) are permissible?

Test Marking

- ___ Who has input into marking criteria?
- ___ Who marks the tests?
- ___ Who verifies or checks that marking is correct?
- ___ Who keeps track of scores?
- ___ Who determines what remediation is needed?

Scoring: Total the numbers in the boxes and see where your score falls...

19-38: If your classroom falls into this category, you should explore ways to involve your students more.

39-59: Your students already have many opportunities to be involved in their assessment. How about exploring new ways to increase their involvement.?

60-80: Your students are already quite involved in your classroom assessment. Perhaps you should be helping your colleagues by sharing your ideas.

81-95: Be careful that you are not compromising standards or upsetting your school administrators.

Christine Coombe is testing and measurements supervisor in the General Requirements Unit at the United Arab Emirates University, the United Arab Emirates.

Jon Kinney is a lecturer in General Requirements Unit at the United Arab Emirates University, the United Arab Emirates.